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SUBJECT: EASTERN FRENCH VIEWS ON WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

REF: PARIS 193

CLASSIFIED BY: Vincent Carver, CG, Strasbourg, State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Most local and regional officials caution that the French public's tolerance for continued French fighting in Afghanistan will sharply decrease if there are waves of French casualties. Viewed from the eastern France, the Central Government has thus far not demonstrated any concerted strategy for addressing the public's concerns in this region. End summary

¶2. (C) We have spoken separately with the mayors of major cities in eastern France, including Strasbourg, Mulhouse, Metz, and Colmar, as well as with numerous other local and regional officials throughout the French regions of Alsace and Lorraine, over the past five months on the French role in Afghanistan. Our interlocutors unanimously predict a strong weakening of French public support (already tentative according to opinion polls) should there be further serious attacks on French troops in Afghanistan. Almost all decline to identify what the tipping point might be, but several noted that another incident like the August 2008 attack that left 10 French soldiers dead would generate serious public debate on the future of the French military presence in Afghanistan.

¶3. (C) Metz Mayor Dominique Gros, a Socialist, said that further "substantial" losses by the French would cause politicians and commentators to link Afghanistan to the French "civil war" in Algeria. Gros explained that, regardless of the flaws in the comparison, the public could easily be convinced that French troops were in a "no-win situation" in Afghanistan and that the best strategy would be to declare victory and withdraw. While noting that he supported French involvement, Gros criticized President Sarkozy for not having adequately explained French interests in maintaining troops in Afghanistan.

Alsace Regional President Adrien Zeller (UMP) rejected the comparison with Algeria but acknowledged that the public's tolerance for losses in Afghanistan is not limitless. Zeller said that a few more "waves" of "major" attacks would pressure Paris to either withdraw or set a deadline for withdrawal of French forces.

¶4. (C) Strasbourg Mayor Roland Ries (Socialist), discussing the war in September, told us that the Elysee had done a poor job in explaining the war to the French public and therefore could not expect solid support in times of difficulty. Strasbourg Deputy Mayor Robert Hermann (Socialist) told us in early February that the GOF would not have an easy time of convincing opposition politicians of the need to increase France's military contribution in Afghanistan should such a request come from Brussels or Washington. The only regional figure who noted that Paris would have little trouble in weathering any surge in public opinion against further French involvement was, predictably, Mulhouse Mayor (and State Secretary for Veterans' Affairs) Jean-Marie Bockel. Bockel told us recently that the French Government remained confident that it could weather any

storms an upswing in French casualties might bring.

¶5. (U) In light of the August 19 deaths of the 10 French soldiers, the major regional daily, "Dernieres Nouvelles d'Alsace" (DNA) asked, "What is the strategy, what is the geopolitical vision, and for what results?" Popular DNA Op-Ed writer Jean-Claude Kiefer claimed that, "French troops are being drawn into a quagmire." Lorraine's major daily, "L'Est Republicain" conducted a poll in October, revealing that 65 percent of respondents replied "no" with 30 percent replying "yes" to whether France "should continue to intervene in Afghanistan." While we are not aware of any recent polling on this subject in this region, our informal conversations with a wide range of French citizens do little to change the overall picture from October.

¶6. (C) Comment: Some of the Socialist politicians with whom we've spoken view the Afghanistan war through the prism of party politics - any strengthening of French public opinion against the war could translate into an electoral weakening of Sarkozy and his party. Many local and regional officials are struck at how the GOF has not taken the offensive publicly to build up public support for the war in Afghanistan. Most of our contacts here appear relatively relaxed at France's proposed full reintegration into NATO, although they are wary of the potential link to an increased French role in Afghanistan.

CARVER